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LITHUANIA'S LONELY LEADERSHIP 2.0

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The article scrutinizes Lithuanian foreign policy within the framework of the regional leadership concept first introduced in the early 2000s. The reasons of failure of the first leadership attempt in 2004–2008 are analyzed, as are the reasons behind the revival of the concept in 2010 and onwards. While overall economy seems to be on the mend and relationships with adjacent countries (Poland, most notably) are improving, Lithuanian leadership, argues the author, is still very much a subcontract one: it follows the “export democracy” model, has a narrow agenda and is implicitly geared towards curtailing the influence of its eastern neighbor. Escalation of violence and further development of social and economic crisis in Ukraine make a European-style reform (where Lithuania is a self-proclaimed expert) even less relevant, while confrontational rhetoric towards Russia may lead to economic losses and contribute to rising political tension in the region.

Key words: Lithuania, foreign policy, regional leadership, Post-Soviet space, energy security, Russian-Lithuanian relations

The 25th anniversary of the second — at least, over the several past centuries — independence of the Baltics is near. There can be no doubt that Lithuania played the leading role in the mass movement for secession from the USSR. Soviet policy made Lithuania the largest Baltic republic in terms of population, economic potential, and political ambitions. However, during the inter-war period, Latvia was the informal leader in the region.

In the early 1990s, Lithuania was the first to rid itself of the Russian military contingent. The country was a priority candidate for NATO membership in the late 1990s, had the best relations with Russia in the first half of the 2000s, and was the first to sign a border

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treaty with the Russian Federation (as well as the Agreement on Illegal Migrant Readmission in the framework of Kaliningrad negotiations). Finally, Lithuania engaged in ‘exporting democracy’ in the second half of the 2000s more actively than the other republics, having proclaimed its political and economic emancipation sufficient to assume regional leadership. In 2013, Lithuania became the first Baltic state to preside over the EU.

Attempts to formulate new, ‘proactive’, foreign policy priorities date back to the country’s accession to the EU and NATO in 2004. Despite the euphoria that followed, it became evident that European policy-makers saw Lithuania in the position of geographical, political and economic periphery. The idea of regional leadership’ conceived in the mid-2000s was designed to address the issues of Lithuanian new foreign policy priorities and the country’s niche and specialisation in the European policy. The new foreign policy concept, according to M. Jurkinas, describes “transatlantic activism and Western-norm entrepreneurship through active involvement in regional co-operation around the Baltic Sea and in Eastern Europe, that is in Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and the South Caucasus” [3]. Foreign policy environment seemed to be favourable to attain these objectives: a wave of ‘colour revolutions’ swept across almost all post-Soviet regimes (although not necessarily resulting in establishment of pro-Western governments); the EU and the US turned their increased attention to the post-Soviet space; the thaw in the US-Russian relations ended; and the EU-Russia relations started to stagnate.

Yet some believe that the task proved to be too ambitious. Susceptibility of new post-Soviet partners to the proposed successful (as Vilnius claims) experience of transformation and integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures was exaggerated, as was the support from external counteragents. Post-Soviet countries that made an opportunistic decision to oppose Russia in the post-Soviet space started to fall back to their usual balancing behaviour. Attempts to establish alternative integration groups and work towards a new spatial organisation in the post-Soviet region (in particular, within the Black/Baltic/Caspian Sea area) failed though owing to both conflict of interests and the ad hoc nature of external support. Poland was more successful in taking on the leading role in the post-Soviet space — the country teamed up with Sweden to initiate the Eastern Partnership (but listen to the Lithuanian establishment, and you will understand that their country has also played a significant part in the process). The Baltics was significantly affected by the 2008 economic crisis, and so foreign policy issues were off the menu. The (second) unsuccessful attempt to block the EU-Russian negotiations after the hostilities in South Ossetia (Lithuania did not receive support from any other EU country), the change of leadership in Poland in 2010 after the tragic death of President Lech Kaczyński, and certain actions taken by the Dalia Grybauskaitė in her early presidency resulted in the political semi-isolation of Vilnius. Relations with almost all major partners — Russia, Poland, and the US — were deteriorating. The EU also treated Lithuanian attempts to play an active role in the region with caution. Regional leadership’, technically targeted at the post-Soviet states, was a concept invented for the national audience and remained an element of policy towards Russia, which was

increasingly dominated by the containment rhetoric. As E. Nekrašas stresses, Lithuanian foreign policy (including that without the EU) remained a 'one issue policy', whereas the regional leadership concept was non-realistic, disconnected from Lithuania's national interests, and viewed as an obstacle to Lithuanian relations with both the EU and Russia [5].

It is worth stressing that the paradigm behind the policy towards Russia changed back in the mid-2000s. When the government was dominated by conservative and social democrats, the rhetoric ranged from mobilization-driven to constructive and pragmatic. However, in 2004–2005, when social democrats headed by G. Kirkilas formed the government, the policy became confrontational. Mainstream Lithuanian policy stresses that aggressive rhetoric against Russia aimed at drawing external attention and mobilising the voters is the most efficient *modus operandi* in relations with its eastern (geographically, also western) neighbour.

This period also saw the politicisation of energy cooperation¹, one of traditional building blocks of Russian-Lithuanian relations. Confrontation arose in 2006, when the extension of the Druzhba pipeline to the Mažeikiai oil refinery was closed (officially, due to technical reasons). Lithuania was one of the initiators of European energy markets liberalization (the Third Energy Package), which required nationalisation of gas transportation facilities — previously partly owned by Gazprom. The project of an LNG terminal in Klaipėda is developing alongside the Baltic NPP project in Kaliningrad; a poorly planned project of the Visaginas NPP is being pushed through. The call for Russia to compensate for the damage inflicted by the Soviet Union during occupation is back on the agenda; Russia is being forced to participate in the investigation of the 1991 events in Vilnius and Medininkai.

Of course, Lithuanian initiatives in the post-Soviet space, which, as it was stressed above, became the key elements of the regional leadership strategy, were a major irritant for Moscow. It was clear that this policy is being pursued in the context of increasing regional presence of the US and Europe, particularly in the framework of the American Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (e-PINE) initiative and the emerging Eastern Partnership. Moreover, in 2008, when Lithuania attempted to block the EU-Russian negotiations on the new framework agreement, the list of requirements included resolving 'frozen' conflicts in Georgia and Moldova. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that attempts to exert influence on the post-Soviet space were the main cause of deteriorating relations with Russia. When in the late 2000s, Moscow softened its position on the Eastern Partnership, it was in part due to the low efficiency of the programme. What is more, Poland's active stance in the post-Soviet space did not become an obstacle to normalising relations with Russia in the beginning of 2010s.

¹ It is worth noting that the 2012 Programme of the Government Coalition stressed the need to depoliticise energy projects (p. 302). Cf.: Šešioktas vyrausybės 2012–2016 metų programa [The Programme of the 16th Government for 2012–2016] 13.12.2012. URL: http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc_l?p_id=439761 (accessed on 26.02.2015).



The 2009 presidential elections brought a new tentative hope that the freshly elected Russian-educated Lithuanian leader — whose political career was associated with the patriarch of Lithuanian politics A. Brazauskas — would adjust Lithuanian foreign policy accordingly. After all, during her election campaign, the future president showed strong interest in the issue. When commenting on the regional leadership concept, D. Grybauskaitė stressed, “Lithuanian attempts to establish itself as the regional leader are self-suggestion” [7]. The new era of Lithuanian policy was riddled with contradictions. Some elements of pragmatism and an attempt to accommodate a unilateral pro-American policy at the expense of more active performance within the EU accompanied by the shift of the regional focus from the post-Soviet space to European North was accompanied by deterioration in relations with Russia and identifying energy security as priority.

The momentum was created by the coordination of interests of major parties (primarily, conservatives and social democrats) and bureaucracy. In the conditions of increasing party fragmentation and economic crisis, the latter started to play a more important role in identifying political and economic priorities and shaping public opinion. The resulting consensus is aimed to ensure maximum autonomy from the former parent state and the marginalisation of forces supporting cooperation with Moscow.

Ideologically, this momentum is supported by a set of lingering ideas about Russia and relations with Russia. In particular, it includes the following provisions. Firstly, under any circumstances, Russia is perceived as a threat to Lithuanian independence — either because of Russian instability or its imperial ambitions. Secondly, Russian-Lithuanian relations are asymmetric by default, and Russia is not ready to treat Lithuania as an equal partner. Therefore, an effective policy towards Russia is possible only within the EU coalition, desirably with the US participation. Thirdly, the EU security assurances are not completely reliable, since the leading European countries can conspire with Russia behind the backs of smaller countries. In these conditions, Lithuania is interested in a strong military and, preferably, economic presence of the US in the Baltic Sea region (NATO mechanisms notwithstanding). However, until recently, Lithuania considered a military threat from Russia unlikely, which manifested in the low priority of defence spending (below 1% of GDP) and the transition from conscription to a volunteer force (alongside an increase in the role of the volunteer reserves).

Persistently negative attitude to Russia among the political elite was evident from the result of the 2012 parliamentary elections won by the centre-left social democratic coalition — the Labour Party headed by Viktor Uspaskich, Order and Justice headed by ex-President R. Paksas, and the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania. These parties traditionally supported constructive and pragmatic approach to relations with Russia, and the coalition agreement stressed the need to use Lithuanian geopolitical position for rapprochement with the new neighbours and Russia, to ensure a reset (*Lit. perkrovimas*) in Russian-Lithuanian relations and to look into the future, not the past [10]. In reality, however, the new government did not make any adjustments to the foreign policy. Typical to the Lithuanian political system, where

the influence of the president as an institution, especially in foreign policy, depends on his/her popularity, the control of foreign policy was handed over to D. Grybauskaitė. However, the coalition agreement of 2012 does not mention leadership, and its priorities are formulated as follows: “encouraging and developing regional cooperation, promoting the image of Lithuania as a centre of interregional cooperation. Creating favourable conditions for trilateral cooperation of the Baltics. Developing strategic partnership with Poland. Initiating and promoting new formats of regional cooperation between Nordic, Central and Eastern European states” [10]. The very wording points to the reorientation of Lithuanian foreign policy to the Nordic-Baltic and Central European regions.

In 2013, Lithuania managed to almost overcome a crippling economic crisis and set on the path of joining the Eurozone (this goal was attained on January 1, 2015). At the same time, the need for criticism towards Russia increased as the US-Russian reset came to an end, the EU-Russia relations entered the stage of stagnation, and geopolitical competition in the post-Soviet space intensified. The EU is trying to increase its influence in the region through inviting a number of countries — Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia — to sign association agreements. These hasty policies of Brussels were caused not only by the increasing readiness of post-Soviet countries for further EU integration, but also — and to a greater degree — by the reaction to advancing Eurasian integration. In 2013, as the EU was presided by Lithuania, Eastern Partnership was given top priority. The PR crown jewel of Lithuanian presidency should have been signing of the association agreement between the EU and Ukraine at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit in November 2013.

EU presidency was taken in Lithuania as a chance to reanimate the concept of regional leadership. As M. Šešelgyte writes, “it is possible to call the Eastern Partnership a specific priority, which gives Lithuania good chances to achieve something tangible... whereas the unsigned agreement could become a disappointment for Lithuania and downplay the possible achievements of the presidency” [9, p. 9]. The refusal of Ukrainian leadership to sign the agreement resulted in the revolutionary upsurge in Kyiv and, later, the on-going conflict in the east of Ukraine. Lithuanian politicians from both right-wing liberal and left-wing parties actively support the Euromaidan revolution, and some of them even took part in the protests. Lithuanian leadership fervently supports Kyiv; President Grybauskaitė has made extremely strong statements (in comparison to those of the leaders of the other Baltic and Central European states)².

The conflict in Ukraine made it possible for Lithuanian political elite to legitimise the increase in military spending, launch the discussion on reintroducing conscription, and prioritise energy security (which is reduced to

² “Today, Ukraine is fighting for peace in all of Europe, for all of us. If the terrorist state that conducts aggression against its neighbour is not stopped, the aggression can spread to Europe and further” (http://www.bbc.co.uk/ukrainian/ukraine_in_russian/2014/11/141124_ru_s_grybauskaite_visit_to_kyiv (accessed 01.03.2015)).



the politicisation of economic cooperation in the field of energy), including the construction of the Visaginas NPP. Despite the results of the 2012 referendum, which showed that NPP construction was not supported by most Lithuanians, a poorly concealed unwillingness of Latvia and Estonia to co-invest in the construction, and little chances for support from the EU structural funds, Lithuanian leadership (the president, prime minister, and minister of energy) continued to gauge public opinion as to the development of domestic nuclear energy³. It seems that despite obvious economic, financial, technological, and environmental complications, the NPP project has certain prospects. Firstly, after unit 2 of the Ignalina NPP was closed in 2009, Lithuania became a power importer, the second largest consumer of Russian energy abroad (approximately 70% of consumption). Secondly, there are technical opportunities for developing nuclear power generated using the remaining Ignalina NPP infrastructure. Thirdly, in the context of prospective disconnection of the Baltic energy systems from Russia and Belarus (the BRELL energy system), the Visaginas NPP can become a major regional power generation source. Finally, a solution to the problem of gas supply diversification was found by the end of 2014 — a floating LNG terminal started operating in Klaipėda. Thus, Lithuanian elite can set new objectives in the field of energy security.

It seems that advanced Third Energy Package practices, which helped Lithuania to get a 20% discount from Gazprom (however, more moderate Latvia and Lithuania used to buy gas at lower rates than Lithuania) [4], can lay groundwork for attaining regional leadership. However, certain circumstances make this less plausible: the LNG terminal does not meet the needs of the whole country, nor does it ensure lower prices for end users (the calculated price of pipeline gas decreases alongside oil prices). The cost of infrastructure maintenance is increasing and other energy projects, in particular, a gas interconnection with Poland (Vilnius was sharply criticised by Warsaw [6]), are becoming less attractive; the framework for economic cooperation in the Baltic Sea region resting, to a great degree, on energy initiatives, is falling apart. Gazprom's withdrawal from Lithuanian gas transportation companies can lead to the disruption of gas transit to the Kaliningrad region via Lithuania due to both energy consideration and as a result of decreasing interdependence and increased risks [2]. Therefore, the Kaliningrad transit factor — a traditional stabiliser of Russian-Lithuanian relations — will diminish in significance.

Conclusion

Aspirations of small countries to raise their status and move away from the political and economic periphery through either fulfilling mediator's functions or leadership in certain functional areas has been described by political scientists before. In the post-Soviet space, a number of countries claimed regional leadership, although the results were usually of self-serving nature.

³ See, for instance, <http://regnum.ru/news/1887276.html> (accessed on 14.03.2015).

Vilnius believes that a number of factors give Lithuania the right to claim a special political role. Firstly, Lithuania (as well as other Eastern European countries) has extensive expertise in the foreign policy of Russia and post-Soviet space. The Ukrainian events of 2014—2015 are being used to corroborate Lithuanian perspective on Russian policy. Secondly, Lithuania has a lot of experience in market transformations and democratic reforms, which resulted in the accession to NATO and the EU. Within these organisations, the country is “in a good position to influence the formulation of the common foreign and security policy objectives in each of these key institutions and to catalyse the support by bigger and more powerful partners with richer resources toward their realization” [8]. Thirdly, Lithuania is believed to be more pro-European than the European average. This position is successfully inculcated by the political elite. For instance, Lithuania is proud of being the first EU country to have ratified the EU Constitution (the Lisbon Treaty) [9, p. 3].

Today, the tables seem to have turned on Lithuanian regional leadership. Relations with the neighbouring countries, in particular Poland, are improving. Lithuania is trying to use a special approach in relations with Belarus. Economic growth has become sustainable; however, it would be an exaggeration to speak of an attractive internal development model. The EU presidency made it possible to gain bureaucratic experience within the EU, whereas the Ukrainian events affirmed the validity of Lithuanian policy towards Russia. The country’s policy in the post-Soviet space is aimed at capitalizing on its influence in the EU (“The increase in the influence of small countries is brought about by their image and reputation. The accumulation of this ‘capital’ is facilitated by the consistent pro-European policy of the country, its ability to transmit its successful experience to external partners, etc.” [1]). Finally, Lithuania benefits from its small size, which makes it possible for the country to voice initiatives, which cannot be proposed by bigger players.

Still, it seems that, in the mid-term perspective, the Ukrainian events will accentuate the problematic aspects of Lithuanian leadership, which is characterised by subcontractor (transmission of the leadership and development models from more influential centres) and negative nature (weakening the influence of a regional player up to containment) and has a narrow regional agenda (part of the post-Soviet space). The hostilities and deepening socio-economic crisis in Ukraine make European-style economic reforms increasingly irrelevant, to say nothing of the perspective integration into transatlantic structures. The acute phase of geopolitical rivalry limits the opportunities of small countries, whereas unambiguous support for one party devaluates its mediating potential. Against the increasing significance of power factor in global politics, Lithuanian position does not look so good.

Moreover, the very concept of leadership suggests that there are the leaders and the led. It seems that post-Soviet countries cannot be positively classified as the led anymore. Despite all efforts aimed at building the Visegrad group/the Baltics/the Nordic countries (V4/NB8) axis, the positions of these states on relations with Russia and the situation in the post-Soviet spa-



ce are not identical. The Nordic countries traditionally try to keep the Baltics at a distance. The Visegrad group has recently normalised its political relations with Russia, which is manifested in a number of joint economic projects. Latvia and Estonia, which pursue an extremely cautious policy of 'low intensity' in the region, despite the proclaimed support for post-Soviet republics, try to avoid tension in relations both with Russia and domestically (in view of the high proportion of non-Latvian/Estonian population). Yet it does not mean that Riga and Tallinn are ready to let Vilnius do the 'dirty job'. The Baltic solidarity is rather ephemeral, whereas the commonality of interests in energy, transport, and even defence is limited.

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